

LIVING MEANINGFULLY, DYING JOYFULLY

Address by Ajahn Brahmavamso to the Global Conference on Buddhism 2002
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In this presentation, I will use stories and anecdotes, as well as some jokes, to demonstrate how we can find out for ourselves the meaning of life, in order to live meaningfully. Then I will go on to show that living life meaningfully, according to the Dharma, will take the grief out of loss, and let us die joyfully.

~O~

In the summer of 1969, just after my 18th birthday, I was enjoying my first experience of tropical jungles. I was travelling in the Yucatan Peninsula of Northeast Guatemala, heading for the recently discovered pyramids of the vanished Mayan civilization.

In those days, travel was difficult. It took me three or four days to cover the few hundred kilometres from Guatemala City to the ruined temple complex known as Tical. I travelled up narrow rainforest rivers on oil-soaked fishing boats, down winding dirt roads balanced atop heavily loaded trucks, and through small jungle paths on ramshackle rickshaws. It was a region remote, poor and pristine.

When I finally arrived at the extensive complex of abandoned temples and ancient pyramids, I had neither guide nor guide book to tell me the meaning of those impressive stone monuments pointing to the sky. Nobody was around. So I started climbing one of the tall pyramids.

On reaching the top, I suddenly knew the meaning of the pyramid, its purpose.

For the previous three days, I had been travelling exclusively through jungle. The roads, paths and rivers were like tunnels through the dense greenery. Jungle

quickly made a ceiling above any new thoroughfare. I hadn't seen the horizon for many days. Indeed, I hadn't seen far distances at all. I was in jungle.

On top of that pyramid, I was above all the tangle of the jungle. Not only could I see where I was in the map-like panorama spread before me, but also I could now see in all directions, with nothing between infinity and me.

Standing up there as if on top of the world, I imagined what it might have been like for a young Mayan Indian who had been born in the jungle, raised in the jungle, who had lived all their life in the jungle. I pictured them in some religious rite of passage being led gently by the hand, by a wise old holy man, up to the summit of a pyramid for the very first time. When they rose above the tree line and beheld their jungle world unfolded and spread out before them, when they gazed beyond the limits of their world to the horizon and above, they would see emptiness above and around, with no thing and no body between them and the infinite. Their hearts would resonate with the clear symbols of Truth. Insights would flower and give their fruit. They would understand their place in their home world, and they would have seen the infinite, the emptiness, which embraces it all. Their life would have found its meaning.

~O~

Living meaningfully requires such deep insights. We all need to grant ourselves the time and the peace to climb that pyramid inside each one of us, to rise above and beyond the tangled jungle that is our life, if only for a short time. Then we will see for ourselves our place among things, the overview of our life-journey, and gaze unimpeded at the infinity holding it all. Call that meditation if you will, silent knowing or still seeing. It is just like the Mayan Indian ascending the pyramid and transcending his jungle home, so as to find meaning.

~O~

I could tell you what "living meaningfully" is, but that would just add one more philosophy to the confusion of spiritual sciences that you may already be burdened

with. One of the beauties of Buddhism is that it does not tell you what to believe, but it tells you how to find out.

For example, for many years, I believed what other people told me about happiness.

When I was 14 years old, I was studying for my O-level examinations in a high school in London. My parents and teachers advised me to stop playing soccer in the evenings and weekends, but instead to stay at home giving the time to my homework. They explained how important the O-level exams were and that if I did well, then I'd be happy.

So I followed their advice and did very well. But it didn't make me that happy because my success meant that now I must study even harder, for another two years, for the A-level exams. My parents and teachers advised me to stop going out in the evenings and weekends, chasing girls now rather than chasing a football, but instead to stay at home and study. They told me how important the A-level exams were and that if I did well, then I'd be happy.

So I followed their advice and, once again, did very well. But once again, it didn't make me that happy, because now I had to study hardest of all, for three more long years, at a University for a degree. My parent (my father was now dead) and teachers advised me to steer clear of the bars and parties, but instead to work hard. They told me how essential a University degree is for success in life, and that if I did well, then I'd be happy.

At this point, I started to become suspicious.

I saw some of my older friends who had done well, got their degrees and were working jolly hard. They told me that they were working so hard to save up money to buy something important. When they had enough to buy themselves a car, or a small apartment, then they'd be happy.

When they had bought their small car, they still weren't too happy. They were struggling in the turmoil of romance, looking for their partner in life. When they were married, they said to me, then they'd be happy.

Once married they would have to work so hard to buy a bigger apartment, or even a dream house. "When we have saved up enough to put down a deposit, then we'll be happy", they explained.

Then they would have children to wake them up at night, soak up all their spare money and generate a quantum leap in worry. Happiness would once again be put off. As so many told me, "Once the kids are grown up, left home and settled, then we can do what we want". Then they'd be happy.

By the time the kids had left home, the parents were staring at retirement. They continued to work hard, investing and saving for their old age. "When I retire", they said, "Then I'll be happy".

Even before they retired, and certainly after, my elderly relatives and friends were all going to church. Have you ever noticed how many old people like going to temples and churches? That is because they all think, "When I die, then I'll be happy"!

That was the sort of happiness they wanted me to believe in: "When you get this or get that, then you'll be happy". Happiness was always a dream in the future, like a rainbow one or two steps ahead, but forever just out of reach. Something was wrong. No one was really happy now.

That is what happens when we simply believe others, rather than seeing the truth for ourselves. If you live your life pursuing possessions, accumulating attachments, even hurrying after heaven – you will discover that you are not living meaningfully.

Many modern media gurus propose that a fulfilling relationship is the key to living meaningfully. Too many of us, I think, buy that line without questioning it fully.

Why is it that we don't choose our children, yet we love them forever, and unconditionally? Even if they turn out far less than desired, we still love them. On the other hand, although we carefully choose our husband or wife, checking them out more thoroughly than anything else in our life before signing the contract, on the whole we do not love them forever, and certainly never unconditionally! Why?

It is because the love that flows between partners in a relationship is not the same as the love that flows between parents and children.

In an article in Time magazine several years ago entitled, "The Chemistry of Love", bio-chemists demonstrated that when boy meets girl over a romantic, candle-lit dinner, hormones are secreted into the bloodstream to produce a chemically induced high. Your partner literally "turns you on". And you love that high, not that person. Or as Time put it, "You love the way they make you feel". Later, when your body builds up a natural tolerance to those chemicals, your partner doesn't turn you on any more. So it's not their fault after all. It is just chemistry. So, please, never shout and get angry with your partner, shout and get angry at the chemistry book instead!

The love between a parent and a child is substantially different. You love them even though there may be nothing in it for you. You love them irrespective of the way they make you feel. It is selfless love, unconditional love.

My father revealed such a love to me when I was only 13, or so. When there was only the two of us sitting in his old car, in a backstreet of West London, he turned round and said to me.

"Son, whatever you do in your life, the door of my house will always be open to you." Then he drove back to our home.

I was, at the time; too young to understand what he meant, but old enough to know it was something important. I remembered it. Only many years later, long after my father had died, while I was a young monk, did I decipher its real meaning.

His house, our home, was a small rented apartment in a poor area of West London. It wasn't much of a place to open to anyone. We were never afraid of burglars, because we thought that if a burglar came in and saw our place, then he would probably leave us something out of his own pocket from compassion!

What my father meant, what he was really trying to say was:

“Son, whatever you do in your life, the door to my heart will always be open to you”.

That is what is meant by unconditional love. That is the type of love often found between parents and children. That is selfless love. No-strings-attached love. Freeing love. “Whatever you do in your life, the door to my heart will always be open to you”

~O~

Back to relationships, which type of love flows between you and your partner? Here's a test for you to find out.

Imagine your partner. Do you really love them? Do you want them to be happy? Do you truly care about their well being? Is their happiness the most important thing in the world for you?

Now imagine that you go home from this conference to find that your partner has run off to Paris with your best friend for a steamy affair. How would you feel?

If you really cared for their well being, then you would be thrilled to hear how happy they both are now. If you really loved your partner, you'd be overjoyed that they are now even happier with your best friend than they were with you. If your loved one's happiness was that important to you, you would be ecstatic – Oh What

Joy! -- to read that they were having such a great time together in the moonlight by the Seine. You always wanted your partner to be happy, now they are. What's the problem?

~O~

This test makes the point that love in most relationships is selfish love, conditioned love. It is rooted in attachment and branches, sooner or later, into suffering. They say there are three rings in a marriage:

The engagement ring
The wedding ring
And suffer-ring

~O~

Selfless love is without attachment. It is rooted in giving and branches, inevitably, into freedom. It is the type of love which says, "Whatever you do, the door of my heart is open to you". It is the way that we can all live meaningfully.

Such selfless love is the foundation of all charity work. If you give a donation expecting recognition, that is not selfless. If you serve a community wanting to be praised, that is not giving. If you offer your friendship to another wanting something in return, then that is not compassion. Charity, like selfless love, says, "Whatever you do, whoever you are, I give you my heart and share it with you".

Even monks practise charity. My monastic life is a festival of giving.

A woman called me on the phone an hour before I was to give a public talk.

"Are you speaking tonight?" she politely enquired.

"Yes, madam. The talk begins a 7.30 pm", I replied.

"How much does it cost to get in?" she continued.

"Nothing, madam, nothing at all", I explained.

"No, no!" she interrupted, "You don't understand. How much money do I have to pay?"

“Madam, you don’t have to pay any money. All my talks are free”.

“Listen!” she shouted down the phone line, “DOLLARS! CENTS! How much must I cough up to get through the door?”

“Madam”, I said soothingly, “You don’t cough up any money at the door, neither on the way in nor on the way out. We don’t ask for your name nor press you for a donation. If you don’t like the talk, you may walk out at any time. It’s free”.

There was a long pause.

“Well” she said with sincere consternation, “What do you guys (meaning ‘monks’) get out of this then?”

“Happiness, madam”, I replied, “We only get happiness”.

~O~

Such selfless giving is the difference between living life meanly and living life meaningfully. The more you let go the more richly one lives. That’s why all the donation boxes in my temples in Perth are called “Letting Go Boxes”.

The Buddha said at Dhammapada verse 204

“Contentment is the greatest wealth.”

Thus Buddhism, which teaches such contentment through selfless love: “Whatever you do, the door of my heart is open to you”, is all about wealth creation. The meaning of life is to generate such wealth. Contentment is your portfolio, selfless love are your shares, giving the most secure of investments with dividends literally “out of this world”, all guaranteed by the Chairman of the Reserve, the Buddha Himself.

~O~

The seventeenth century English romantic poet, John Keates, opened his celebrated poem ‘Endymion’ with the timeless words:

“A thing of beauty, is a joy forever”.

Indeed, many of us find meaning in life through the appreciation of beauty. – through watching a glorious sunset in the evening, seeing a roaring waterfall in an

unscarred forest, or by pausing to enjoy a brilliant coloured flower smiling by the wayside. Beauty does give life meaning, but not so much in the way said so far.

Beauty for a monk, said the Buddha (Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta) is virtue. So it is. The most beautiful people in the world are those who are pure hearted. The good person is good to be with. The kind, are kind of nice. And a holy one among the many folk is like a rose emerging out of the thorn bush. Even a wrinkled, broken toothed and grey haired old person who has lived a virtuous life glows with an inner beauty that would make any super-model envious.

Monk teachers like me encourage all their listeners to live a moral life, to gain that inner beauty that, in John Keates' words, is "a joy forever". Which is why I call my Buddhist City Centre in Perth, Western Australia, not "Dharmaloka" but "Ajahn Brahm's Beauty Parlour"! I give little "nips and tucks" to your moral life, apply facial treatments to your honesty, and take the wrinkles out of your precepts. Living life with such a beauty is living meaningfully. Try it. If you want a good time, then be good.

~O~

All good things come to an end. We all die. As a monk, I have attended more funerals than the flowers by a graveside. Many times I have listened to relatives and friends after the service talking about the one who has just died. It is remarkable that what they remember is not the deceased's wealth, nor their property, nor their power. What is talked about after the funeral is the person's goodness, their kindness and how charitable they were. It is as if they are all summing up the newly dead person's whole life. And what counts, the only things that count, are things like charity, virtue and selfless love. Such qualities are, in accountancy terms, the "bottom line" of a person's life. It is what their life meant and what gave it meaning. It is strange that only through a death can we realize the wisdom of the Buddha's teachings on what constitutes living meaningfully.

~O~

For a person who has a profitable bottom line, who has lived their life meaningfully, then dying can be joyful. A Buddhist would understand that because they have performed much good karma, then they can legitimately look forward to a wonderful time after death. They know that they are simply exchanging a worn-out old body for something much better. It is like buying a new car, the vehicle changes but the driver carries on. Where is the tragedy in that?

Moreover, living meaningfully, as explained so far, is a training in letting go. You let go of some of your wealth to perform charity. You let go of gross behaviour to keep precepts. You let go of concern for yourself to practise compassion. And you let go of desires to practise meditation. The Dharma is a complete training course in letting go.

So when it comes time to let go of your body and pass through the death experience, a person trained in the Dharma lets go gracefully. In my long experience dealing with the death of both Buddhists and non-Buddhists in Western countries, Buddhists die so much more peacefully and joyfully than anyone else.

Once, a close disciple rang me from hospital. The woman, in her early forties, had been diagnosed that morning with an untreatable cancer. She could expect only two or three months more to live. I visited her that same afternoon. From her bed in the cancer ward she was smiling and joking with me as she made plans for her death.

As I left the cancer unit, the head nurse of the ward asked to speak with me. She told me that she was extremely concerned that my disciple was in denial, not accepting the diagnosis of impending death. I had to reply quite firmly that my disciple was not in denial at all. In fact, she had been talking about her death with me for the past hour! You see, the experienced head nurse had never seen such a swift acceptance before. She had only seen terror and tears, anger and defiance. And she had mistaken the lack of such negativity to signify denial. She hadn't seen a Buddhist die before, and she found it difficult to comprehend how they could face death so joyfully.

A few months later, at my disciple's funeral, her Christian doctor said how impressed he was that Buddhists die so gracefully.

When you understand Dharma, and live that understanding, then there is nothing sad about dying. The only thing that makes me sad is when people do not live meaningfully and waste their precious life.

~O~

My own father died when I was only 16. I loved him very much and still do. Yet I never cried at his funeral, nor have I cried since. I didn't feel like crying. It took me many years to understand how I felt at the time. Now I use that understanding as a guide on how to die, with joy. This is my understanding.

As a young man, I loved music. All types of music whether classical or rock, jazz or folk. I would spend many an evening in the concert halls and clubs of central London enjoying some of the best orchestras and bands, musicians and singers that our world had to offer. London was a great place to grow up if you liked music.

When the concert was to end, I would stand up with the others, clapping and shouting for more. Often, the orchestra or band would play on for a few minutes. But eventually they had to stop and I had to return home. As I remember walking out of the concert halls late in the evening, it always seemed to be raining in London, in that most miserable manner called "drizzle". It was cold, wet and gloomy, and I knew that I probably would never get to see that great orchestra again. Yet even in the miserable damp darkness of the night, I never felt sad. I never dropped into despair. Instead I was elated and inspired by the great music I had just had the privilege to hear. What a stirring crescendo, what a magnificent performance, what a wonderful experience! I was light years away from the gloom surrounding the London night.

That is the only way I can describe how I felt when my own father died. It was such a short recital, a mere sixteen years. I was clapping and cheering for more at the end. My dad kept playing a little while longer and, in truth, it was a marvellous crescendo to his life. As I walked out of the crematorium in Mortlake, West London,

after his funeral service, I clearly remember that it was drizzling and very cold. Yet I never felt sad at all. I felt inspired, uplifted and deeply moved. “Dad, that was a wonderful performance. That was a tremendous concert that you played in front of your son. I will never forget those fugues and cadenzas and the deep feeling that you gave to your symphony. You were a maestro of life. How lucky I was to have been at your concert”. I was inspired, not sad. I felt deep gratitude not grief. I felt I had witnessed one of the great lives of my era.

That is how one can die joyfully, and joyfully look at the death of a dear one. In one's centre one knows that: “Dear loved one, dearest friend, the door of my heart will forever be open to you, no matter what you ever do, even if you die”. Even in death, you let them go. Such selfless love is freeing. Liberating the one who must leave you, and freeing one's self from all sadness.

So this is what I mean by living meaningfully and dying joyfully. It is what I have seen for myself climbing beyond the confusion of the world in my monk's meditation, like ascending the pyramids in the jungles of Central America. It is what is said by the Buddha in the ancient Sutras. And it is written in your heart right now, waiting to guide you.

When you live your life meaningfully not only will you die joyfully, but you will also give so much joy to all who meet with you, in your life and in death.

Thank you.